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## THE SCHOOL CENSUS AND ITS USE IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION<sup>1</sup>

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WILLIAM A. GREESON  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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The people of the United States resent being compelled to do anything. We are probably the most individualistic people in the world. This characteristic comes from our method of national development. We have been up to comparatively recent times a nation of pioneers. The family would get together its possessions, including its human members, pack them into a covered wagon, start off into a new country, take up some land, establish a home and develop a farm with very little relation to anybody else. The family was a law unto itself, and the people who grew up under such conditions naturally became very decidedly individualistic.

The result appeared in American education. The educational system of this country was essentially a voluntary educational system. It was not organized by some higher authority and thrust upon the people; it was evolved by the people themselves. In such a voluntary educational system the question of whether or not a child is going to school is sure to be settled at first by the choice of the family. But when the country began to be more fully settled, when the population multiplied and cities grew, the voluntary character of the educational system had to be changed. It has been changed.

I was surprised in looking up the matter so far as Michigan is concerned to find that compulsory education is so modern. The first compulsory education law in Michigan was passed

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<sup>1</sup> Delivered on July 15, 1918, as one of the lectures of Superintendents' Week at the University of Chicago.

in 1863, although Michigan was admitted to the Union as a state in 1837. At first the law did not require very much schooling. Children were compelled to go to school from eight until fourteen but only for four months in the year. Even that law was not enforced. In 1866 Principal Sill made the statement that the compulsory education law in Michigan was a dead letter. As a matter of fact, the attendance at school in Michigan decreased about five per cent from 1860 to 1866. In 1869 a beginning was made of the enforcement of the law. I have a feeling, however, from what I know about education in the state that there was never at that time anything that might be called a genuine, thorough enforcement of the compulsory education law, even as mild as that law was. In 1905 the law was changed and in 1915 it was still further modified.

I will not quote the present law, but I may take a moment to give you its essence. Boys and girls must go to school until they have finished the eighth grade or until sixteen years of age. Furthermore, a child must be either in school or lawfully employed until sixteen years of age. The labor law says that no boy or girl may be given a permit to work under fifteen. Therefore, the logical working out of the law, although I think it was never intended to be so, is that it is necessary for children to go to school in Michigan until fifteen years of age regardless of the grade they may be in. The average age of completing the ninth grade in Grand Rapids is fifteen years and three months. Therefore it follows that in Grand Rapids—and what is true in Grand Rapids is true of the other cities in Michigan—the great majority of boys and girls must go through the ninth grade.

It is evident from these facts that the compulsory education law brings us face to face with a problem of the curriculum. I shall have occasion later to emphasize the fact that we are under obligation, if we compel children to attend the ninth

grade, to provide them with suitable courses of study. This point is important for our discussion of compulsory education and the census because the moment we treat compulsion as a reason for adopting certain courses of study it becomes evident that compulsion is not something external to the educational business of the school. The census as one of the chief instruments of enforcing compulsory attendance becomes a part of the truly educational activity of the school organization. The census is an instrument of education.

Until within a very few years the purpose of the school census in Grand Rapids, so far as appeared from the method of taking it, was to present to the State Department a list of names of children between five and twenty years of age in order that public money might be drawn from the state from what is known as the Primary School Fund. The Primary School Fund of Michigan is an important source of revenue to cities. This year we shall draw \$7.21 for every child in the school district of Grand Rapids between the ages of five and twenty. Of course, that is an important matter, but it is not the most important. The moment we think of compulsory education as related to the course of study we see that the superintendent of schools and the board of education must organize the schools in the light of the census. They must know how many children there are and where they live. The erection of schools, the distribution of the teaching staff, the location of the ninth grade all depend on the census, and the census must be taken and kept with a view to making possible the proper organization of the schools.

The school census of Grand Rapids has been worked out so as to give the school officers of the city information which they need to organize the schools. The fundamental fact as shown on the record card is that the census card is a family card and not an individual card. After a good deal of inquiry and study on the question I was convinced that this was the

best and most practical way to keep the census. The family is the unit of social organization and our fundamental card is a family card which gives the name of the mother, the name of the father, and the names of all the children. It contains also twenty-one spaces in which to record residence. We found this to be necessary because people move very often and we have decided that we have not given any too much space to the record of residence.

A very useful device may be mentioned in this connection. The first residence is put in the upper right-hand corner; then as the family moves new addresses are noted below. Some people do not change residence and it is more convenient in checking to have the first residence named in the upper corner. If lower spaces are filled, the eye runs readily down the filled column until it rests on the last and present address.

Various devices are employed to keep the list of residences up to date. The schools report changes. By an arrangement with the moving companies reports are sent to the school office whenever people change residence. People not infrequently report their own changes. As a result the residence is continuously at hand. When the enumerator starts out in any given year a very large part of his work is done. His task is mainly that of bringing the record down to date.

If the enumerator finds no one at home in a house, he leaves a blank which the law requires the family to fill out. By constant checking and cross-checking the census is thus kept alive at all times and is a useful instrument for purposes other than reporting to the state capital the number of children for whom the city claims state money.

The cards contain spaces for the names of all the children in the family. There is also space, it may be noted in passing, for records of special cases of defective children. In the upper left-hand corner is a place for checking any cases of children who are crippled, deaf, blind, tubercular, epileptic, physically

ill, or mentally defective. As a matter of fact, this part of the card is not of very much use at the time the census is taken because a census enumerator in going through the city will not be able to find out whether the child is mentally defective or epileptic or tubercular or physically ill. We find that most cases of deaf children are detected and most cases of children who are crippled or blind. This part of the card is more often filled out later through the efforts of the school to enforce attendance or to take care of the child. It is therefore well to make provision for the recording of such cases so that when those particular cases of children are discovered the school may take them into account in organizing its work.

Cases which are not special must be recorded to show the child's name and age. In order to get the age we require the entry of the date of each child's birth, giving the year, month, and day. I found it difficult to get the census enumerators to understand that point. Before this card was devised the age was given each year in years; that is, a statement was required for each child showing whether he was five, six, seven, eight, or nine years old. This was a source of a great many errors. The date is not so likely to be recorded incorrectly because it is a constant quantity and not a variable one. The single entry for each child is valid as long as the card is in use. This is another characteristic which greatly facilitates the work of the enumerator and at the same time furnishes from year to year a check on the accuracy of the entry.

At the bottom of the card there are printed the names of all the schools in the city, both public and private. Each school has a code number and this is used in checking up the census with the enrollment of the pupils. When the attendance cards are brought in from the schools in the fall of the year the clerks in the census department check the attendance cards with the census cards by writing in the number of the school according to this code. In this way at one and the same time

the census is checked by the attendance and the attendance is checked by the census.

In sending out enumerators to take the census we start with a general diagram of the entire city showing every street and every house, together with the number of every house in which human people can live. The basis of the whole arrangement is simply that we have here a catalogue of all the habitable dwellings in the city. They are arranged by streets and the enumerators go up one side of the street and down the other.

I shall not attempt to take up all the details of our procedure after securing the data for the family cards. The important fact is that when school opens in the fall we can check attendance with a high degree of accuracy. Indeed, we can plan for schools before they open in the fall and we are always on a firm foundation in seeking out parents who do not send their children to school.

There are cards which are sent to parents whose children are not found in school. The first card merely asks for information. Children are sometimes in school but for some reason are not readily located. A diplomatically worded card goes to the parents. Following this first card are others which become increasingly insistent in tone. Finally, the attendance officer may get the case.

There is a corresponding set of cards which pass between the superintendent's office and the schools. In some cases a few exchanges of mail between the home, the school, and the superintendent will locate a child and show that he has all along been in school.

Each step in using the census serves to demonstrate its usefulness as an instrument of educational organization and at the same time the census itself is constantly kept alive by the various checks furnished in its use.

The census finds another application when it becomes the basis at the end of the child's school career of the issuance of

his working permit. In all cases the age of the child must be determined with accuracy. A new law was passed in Michigan to the effect that the superintendent of schools may issue vacation employment permits to children fourteen years of age or over. This requires very little formality or investigation except to be sure that the child is fourteen years of age or over. The census furnishes the evidence in the great majority of cases.

The matter is somewhat more complicated for leaving-school certificates, but here again the chief problem is to determine the child's age and the census with its frequent checkings is invaluable. No child may be given a permit to work under fifteen years of age. A child must go to school until sixteen years of age unless lawfully employed. No child may be lawfully employed under fifteen; therefore the attendance department must determine accurately the age of the child and then if a child is over fifteen and under sixteen he may be given a permit to work if his wages are essential to the support of the family. In regard to several of these matters, we must have people who have the time and are competent to investigate the claims and find out whether or not the wages of the child are essential to the support of the family. Here again the permanent record is of assistance and furnishes the background for intelligent study of family conditions.

The census and permanent record carry over into the period after the child leaves school. If the child is granted a permit, record of this fact is made in the office and is kept on file, showing the date and application for permit to work, the name of the child, the name of the parent or guardian, and application by so-and-so, "the absence of the above named child is necessary for so-and-so." It may be remarked incidentally that a similar record is kept if the child is withdrawn for sickness rather than to work.

In short, the census is a record of the city's contact with the child all through the period of his education up to the



time that the law allows him to become independent of the compulsory law. The census is an expression of the city's recognition of its responsibility under the present compulsory education law.

As I said at first, the system of education in the United States grew up as a voluntary system of schools and the introduction of the compulsory feature is modern. Formerly, the problem for the school authorities was a comparatively simple one. If only those children went to school who wanted to go or whose parents wanted them to go, and if they were allowed to leave school whenever they chose to leave or whenever the parents chose to take them out, and especially if in the high school only those children were found who wanted to go to high school or who were there for the reason that they were attracted to a form of education higher than was offered in the elementary grades, the problem of planning schools was comparatively easy.

Consider the organization of the high-school course under these conditions. In the first place, you have people in the high school who want to go to school or whose parents want them to go, and usually the children want to go themselves. In the second place, you have a select group. In the third place, you have there a group selected largely on the principle that they are preparing definitely for some higher education, for college work. The course of study can be readily fitted to this small selected group.

Our present-day problem is vastly more complex. In Grand Rapids, in the state of Michigan, the law is that pupils must go to school until sixteen years of age or until they have completed the eighth grade and if they have completed the eighth grade they must be either in school or lawfully employed until fifteen years of age. Now, since the average age of completing the ninth grade is about fifteen, it follows that most of the boys and girls in Michigan will complete the ninth grade.

As a matter of fact, in Grand Rapids the school mortality is no greater between the eighth and the ninth grades—in fact, not quite so great as it is between the seventh and eighth grades. Consequently we have to face the fact that we have in the seventh and eighth and ninth grades a group of children which changes very little. There is very little falling out of school in those grades. Our problem is a different one from that which presented itself to superintendents at the time when it was taken for granted that most boys and girls would quit school at the end of the eighth grade.

The matter is one of the most urgent character. I submit to you that it is a crime against childhood to compel a child to go to the ninth grade of an old-fashioned high school where the curriculum is made of algebra and ancient history and English “as she is taught.” It seems to me that is not too strong language. It seems to me that the enforcement of the compulsory education law brings us face to face with a new problem which we must solve, namely, how to do the right thing by those boys and girls who have to go through the ninth grade and who are not going any farther in school.

At the same time we have to do justice to those boys and girls in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades who are going on through the high school and who are probably going to college afterwards. The question is, Can these problems be solved; can we do the right thing for these seventh, eighth, and ninth-grade boys and girls who are certainly not going farther than the ninth grade and also for those who are going through the ninth grade and on through the senior high school and college?

If we are to solve these problems, we must know their numerical magnitude and we must have a complete system for following up every child steadily from his earliest years to his honorable discharge. We must frame our course of study and plan our school equipment on the basis of full and accurate knowledge of the pupils with whom we have to deal.

For Grand Rapids I want to report progress, not a solution of the problem. I think we have made at least a beginning of a solution of the problem by introducing certain innovations into the curriculum. So far as history is concerned, in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, we have a new and carefully formulated body of material suited to our pupils. We have worked out a course in history for these grades which is continuous and yet complete at the various stages. We are now working on a course of English for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, and incidentally I might say that I know of no text-book in English which has been written with these grades especially in mind. I think most books have been written with the thought that in the seventh and eighth grades there is one group and in the ninth grade another. As a matter of fact, an intelligently kept census shows that the ninth grade does not have a group different from that in the two preceding grades. With regard to mathematics for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, I am frank to say I am discouraged. So far as I know, no school system has solved that problem yet.

In a very irregular and halting way I have tried to present to you the question of the school census and its application in school administration. I have tried to bring out several points, but the most important, to my thinking, is the last one that I have been discussing. We find through our census that we have a perfectly definite, sharply defined group of students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades which we ought to consider as a single group presenting certain constant characteristics. It is clearly our duty to so build up a curriculum for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades that the child who leaves the school at the end of the ninth grade—more children leave school at that point than at any other—will have some definite preparation for life while at the same time boys and girls who go on to the senior high school will have a good—I was going to say the best—preparation for the higher work.